

THE SPIRITUAL GIFT OF PRAYER II
The Second Sunday in Lent

(03/13/2022)

Scripture Lessons: Luke 11:1-13; 22:39-46

“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.”
(Luke 22:42)

Today is the second Sunday in Lent. Lent is a time to prepare for the celebration of Easter. It is also a time to embark upon a spiritual journey, a journey that will hopefully end with the death of our “old self” and our rebirth or resurrection in Christ!

Last week, as we reflected on the Letter of James to the early church, we explored the mysterious power of intercessory prayer. As you recall, James 5:13-16 reads,

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

This verse is a powerful articulation of our identity and our mission as a church! As you will note from our Sunday worship bulletin,

*We are a community of faith
believing in the power of prayer,
seeking earnestly to deepen our spiritual life,
and share the love of God with others.*

This morning I would like us to think about the limits or limitations of prayer. This may help us to understand what prayer is and what prayer is not. We will try to determine what makes a prayer a true prayer, and we will also consider the sort of things or states of affairs, no matter how worthy they might be, that should not be the object of our prayer.

First, I would like us to think about whether it makes sense to ask God to do something that goes against what we know as the laws of nature. I know that God can suspend the laws of nature but, for the life of me, I have no idea why God would want to do this! Why would God establish the Laws of Nature, specifically the four basic forces: gravitational, electromagnetic, weak nuclear, and strong nuclear, several milliseconds after the moment of the creation of our

universe in the Big Bang, which took place approximately 13.8 billion years ago, and then arbitrarily or capriciously set these laws aside?

I believe in miracles, but I do not believe that a miracle is the result of God setting aside the laws of nature in a specific situation. I believe that many of the events that we call miracles are not willful violations of the laws of nature by God; they are merely indications that we do not fully understand nature and the presence of God in the universe. This is how I understand the power of intercessory prayer--not as setting aside the conditions that govern the human body, that govern the process of healing, but as activating, strengthening, and empowering the healing process that is already present within us in a way that, from a secular perspective, might be viewed as mysterious or miraculous.

I don't think we can or should ask God to do something that is impossible. To do so would be setting God up for failure! Let me give you a facetious example of a prayer that is not only egocentric and self-serving, but also that asks God to accomplish something which is impossible.

Let's say that I park my car at a parking meter in Boston. I go about my business only to discover, several hours later, that I have forgotten to return to the car to put more money in the meter. As I hurry back to my car, I instinctively say a little prayer: "Please God, don't let me have a parking ticket!"

What is it that I am asking God to do? I may be asking God to reverse time. I know that time is subjective and, according to Einstein, relative, but no matter how much God may want to do this, and I can't imagine why God would want to do this or especially why God would want to do this to spare me the consequences of my own carelessness, it can't be done!

If there were no meter maids covering the street where I parked that day, there will be no ticket on my windshield when I return to the car. When I see the windshield with no piece of cardboard fastened to it by my windshield wipers, should I praise God? Should I thank God? I confess, with a certain degree of shame, that I have done this--I have whispered, "Thank you, God!" But I know deep down that God had nothing to do with my not receiving a ticket, that is unless we believe God micromanages the universe to such an extreme degree that God foreordains the paths that meter maids take on their daily rounds to spare Paul Sanderson from getting a ticket! I'm sorry, but that strikes me as excessively controlling and not just a little pathetic. I wouldn't be interested in worshipping such a God, for only a very weak and insecure God would need to be that controlling!

The only other option is that the meter maid who was working that day on that street and at that hour did indeed ticket my car. If this happened, what do I expect God to do in response to my heartfelt prayer? Do I really think that God will not only miraculously remove the ticket from my windshield, but also somehow remove the record of it from the meter maid's ticket book? Such an expectation strikes me as bizarre!

Ok, I admit that this is a silly example, but I think it makes a point. We need to distinguish between what we want, what we desire, what we wish for, and the true object or focus of prayer. Instead of trying to involve God in the magical resolution of my self-induced predicament, I would have been better off to say that I *hope* I didn't get a ticket. It might also be a good idea to resolve to be more careful or responsible the next time I go to Boston!

Whether I happened to be ticketed or not ticketed on the day I mentioned is simply the luck of the draw. Sometimes I get a ticket when the meter has expired; sometimes I don't. I seriously doubt that the pattern is of any spiritual significance. In addition, I always feel a little sheepish when I ask God to spare me from the consequences of my own stupidity or carelessness. I know God loves me, but I am not sure why God would want to do this. A good and loving parent would not seek to spare his/her child from the consequences of the child's decisions, at least not if the parent wants to help the child grow!

I admit—this is a silly example. However, sometimes our desires are far more noble than my parking ticket example. For example, when I pray for someone who is struggling with cancer, is this a legitimate prayer? I believe it is. As I understand it, I am not asking God to set aside the rules of nature to save that person. I believe that my prayer strengthens the God-given power of healing that is already present within that person. My prayer is an affirmation of my deep metaphysical interconnectedness, my deep interrelatedness with the person through and in God. Prayer, *when it is deep and heartfelt*, to use James's words, can activate or strengthen the healing power that is already present within the person for whom I pray. Sometimes the strengthening of the already-present healing power within the person is enough to help him/her recover; sometimes it is not. Whether the person "recovers" (by my definition of recovery) or not, I believe that my prayer makes a difference.

Several years ago, in one of our study groups, we read a little book entitled *The Power of Prayer*. This book contains short reflections on prayer by distinguished spiritual leaders like Mother Teresa, Henri Nouwen, Dale Evans Rogers, Brooke Medicine Eagle, Jimmy Carter, and Billy Graham.

The preface to the book contains a quote from William Law. Law, who lived from 1686-1761, was a clergyman of the Church of England and a fellow of Cambridge University. Law

was trying to breathe life into the increasingly empty religious forms and rituals of his day. This may be why he was quoted in a book that is trying to help people discover or rediscover the meaning and power of prayer.

Law tells us that prayer is a mighty instrument, “not for getting our will done in heaven, but for getting God’s will done on earth.” Think about it. Prayer is a mighty instrument not for getting our will done in heaven, but for getting God’s will done on earth.

How can William Law’s reflection help us distinguish true prayer from human desire, whether the desire be noble or less than noble? First, it is a warning against the use of prayer to bend God’s will to ours, a warning to avoid the *hubris* that leads us to ask God to set aside the laws of nature to do this. When I pray that I didn’t get a parking ticket, I am asking God to bow to me, to set aside the laws of nature and the needs of other people to make *my life* better or happier. This type of prayer is egocentric, perhaps even a little narcissistic; it is moving in the wrong direction. Instead of asking God to do what I think should be done, I should be asking God to help me do what I should do, and, more specifically, what God wills.

When Jesus tells us to pray that “God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” Jesus is telling us that instead of thinking what it is that *we* want or need, we need to think about what it is that *God* wants and needs. If we can do this, then we can bend our will to God’s. We can then pray with Jesus that not our will, but God’s be done, because *if our prayer is a true prayer, God’s will and ours will be the same*. Regarding Jesus’ prayer that God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven, I don’t find it helpful to think of earth in one place and heaven, where everyone lives according to God’s will, in another. I find it helpful to remember that both heaven and earth are with us right here on earth. There are times when, through our lives or our prayer we are “in heaven,” and there are times when we are not.

True prayer, if it involves the union of our will and God’s, should lead to spiritual growth. It can help us grow in our understanding of God and deepen our relationship with God.

The educator Jean Piaget, in his attempt to help us understand the process of cognitive growth, has given us a way of thinking about our own psychological and spiritual growth. Piaget says that in our understanding of anything, we begin with a schema. A schema is a way of understanding, a concept, a picture. For example, for over 1500 years scientists followed the Egyptian mathematician and astronomer Ptolemy’s understanding of the universe. Ptolemy’s schema was geocentric; it placed the earth in the center of the universe. The sun, moon, and stars revolved around the earth. This became the basic teaching of the church, transmitted through Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas.

Piaget says that as we move through life, we are confronted with certain data. It may be certain teachings; it may be our own life experience. If this data confirms our initial schema, if it is congruent with our schema, it is assimilated into the schema. This functions to make the schema stronger. If the data doesn't fit the schema, we are confronted with two options. First, we can discredit the data, which allows us to leave our initial schema intact. Or we can change or adapt our schema in such a way that it is able to include the new data. This is how we grow. This is how both the physical and the social sciences evolve. This is how medicine evolves.

Nicholas Copernicus, the Polish mathematician, astronomer, and priest who lived from 1473-1543, realized there were problems inherent in Ptolemy's geocentric schema. Copernicus believed that a heliocentric view of our solar system, where the earth and the other planets revolved around the sun, and moons revolved around each planet, solved these problems. However, because he feared the reprisal of the church, he did not allow his findings to be published until after his death. They were, however, picked up by Johannes Kepler, who realized that Copernicus was correct, but the orbits were elliptical, not circular, and then Galileo, who was able to prove that Copernicus and Kepler were correct through a telescope that he invented.

As we know, the religious and scientific authorities of Galileo's day refused to look through the telescope, fearing that the data would threaten their precious schema. In essence, they discredited the new data by calling it heretical. Under threat of being burned at the stake, Galileo recanted, though it is rumored that he muttered into his beard, "It really is the other way around."

Let's think about this process in relation to our schema, our concept of God and its implications for prayer.

You may remember Elizabeth Edwards, the wife of John Edwards, a senator from North Carolina and candidate for the Democratic nomination twenty years ago. Elizabeth was a brilliant, accomplished lawyer and activist (actually, I would rather have had her than her husband as president, but that's not the point).

Elizabeth, who died in 2010 of breast cancer, was a deeply religious person. During a time when she was in remission, probably around 2005, she was interviewed on one of the network stations. The interviewer, whose name I can't remember, asked Elizabeth to share something about her religious faith and the role it played in her life.

Elizabeth said that sometime early in her life she made a bargain with God, a bargain that she kept throughout her life. She promised God that she would be a good person, a good daughter, a good sister, a good friend, a good wife and mother. She would use her extraordinary

gifts as a lawyer to help people. She was a born-again Christian, attended church regularly, and tithed (gave 10% of her total income to the church). She promised to devote her life to make this a better world. From everything I knew about this exceptional woman, she more than kept her part of the bargain.

In exchange for all this, Elizabeth told the interviewer, all God had to do was keep her and her loved ones safe.

We could call this bargain with God Elizabeth's schema; it revealed her understanding of her relationship with God and the role God was expected to play in her life. However, there were two problems. The first was the death of their teenage son in a tragic automobile accident. The second was her breast cancer.

We could call these two events the data of her life experience. This data could not be assimilated into Elizabeth's schema; it didn't fit. Also, since it unfortunately was true, it could not be discredited or denied.

As I watched the interview, I immediately thought of a young woman in a church that I had served. This beautiful young woman, who had grown up in the church, had become an elementary school teacher. A good friend of hers, who taught in the same school as she, developed breast cancer. My parishioner asked me to put her friend on our prayer chain, and she asked our church to pray for her friend to be healed. Unfortunately, her friend died.

Following her friend's funeral, my parishioner told me that she could not believe in a God who would let a beautiful young woman, the mother of three small children, die of cancer. She also could no longer believe in the healing power of prayer. She told me that she would never again set foot in a church. And, as far as I know, she never did.

As you can understand, watching the interview, I was interested in how Elizabeth Edwards processed the data of her life experience, data that was contrary to the understanding she felt she had with God. After sharing with her audience her bargain with God and the ways she felt God had failed to uphold his part of the bargain, Elizabeth lit up like a Christmas tree. She said, "That was the point when I realized that God had never made this bargain with me! This was just a bargain that I wanted God to make for my own benefit. So, I had to embark upon a journey, a spiritual journey to rediscover God, to rediscover the true God, not the God I would like God to be."

Wow! This is what it looks like when someone, confronted with the data of his/her life experience, data that includes her own death and the death of her loved ones, creates a new

schema. This was probably what Job had to do when he realized God was not treating him fairly. This was probably what Peter had to do when Jesus revealed that his triumphant entrance into Jerusalem was going to end in a terrible, painful death. This is probably what all the disciples had to do when they realized that their Lord had died, and that now they were on their own. (Actually, they were not really on their own, but that part of the story comes later.)

In our Sunday morning worship this Lenten season, let us try to discover or rediscover the true meaning and the transforming, healing power of prayer. As we take on the heart and the mind of Jesus, we will become increasingly clear about what prayer is and what prayer is not. As we receive the risen Christ into our hearts, we will find ourselves praying as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane: “not my will, but yours be done.” When this happens, we can then make God’s will our prayer. This is quite different from praying that God will fulfill our desires, no matter how noble those desires may be.

In our worship as the gathered church and in our personal devotions this Lenten season, let us be with God in prayer. Let us seek not to bend God’s will to ours, but to bend our will to God’s. Let us pray not that our will be done by God, but that God’s will be done on earth both in us and through us.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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